

Magliocco, Sabina. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America, is an ethnographic study on late 20th and early 21st century Neopaganism as it is practiced in the United States, especially in the San Francisco Bay area. Written by Sabina Magliocco, a professor of Anthropology and Folklore at the California State University at Northridge and a practicing Neopagan, the book is a fascinating overview of this little known subculture.

Summary

Magliocco begins each chapter with field notes of her personal experiences in the Neopagan movement. The introduction describes the history of Neopaganism and states that it “represents the most important folk revival movement since the folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s.”¹ She characterizes the movement as “predominately white, middle class, well-educated urbanites who find artistic expression in folk and indigenous spiritual traditions”.² Magliocco then discusses her ethnographic methods and personal perspectives. Since neopagans self-describe as countercultural, they often hide their identities and practices from outsiders. She joined their ranks to learn about them. This required balancing her personal role as an initiate and her professional role as a researcher. She also is open about the overwhelming liberal slant and the “head over heels” political activism of many of the members of the neopagan movement.

The author understands Neopaganism as folk tradition because it does not have a single authoritative text and because the tradition has never been part of the main Western discourse. In her narrative, paganism’s roots go back for millennia, but were suppressed by the Protestant Reformation, which tried to remove “spiritual connections” (mystical elements) from the church

¹ Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

and society, and by the Enlightenment, which convinced many people that paganism was not truth and was superstitious.³ In opposition, secret societies such as the Freemason and philosophies such as English Romanticism flourished. Despite protestations to the contrary, however, modern American Neopaganism is not an ancient religion but a diverse set of beliefs derived from the work of Charles Leland, Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardiner in the early and mid-20th century.⁴

When starting any movement one of the most important tasks is to make boundaries; who is in and who is out. Pagans are predominately women and primarily schooled in the humanities, areas devalued by cutbacks in academia and lower pay in the economy. They reject organized religions such as Christianity, modernist thought and the consumerist lifestyle. Neopagans embrace protection of the environment, feminism, and the elevation of marginal and “oppressed” groups as major leitmotifs. Additionally they adopt new personas and often new names. To illustrate their boundaries, Magliocco provides a colorful section on how pagans use jokes.

Unlike Protestants who emphasize doctrine, the “single rubric that unites Neopagan and Witchen groups is experience.⁵ It is knowing with the imagination rather than knowing in the scientific, historical and logical sense that moves pagans, although Magliocco denies that pagans reject reason. Experience, especially of the numinous (filled with the sense of the presence of a divinity), is the goal, and the primary route to the numinous is through ritual. Magic, which some define as “the capability to alter consciousness at will” and others as “the art of getting results”, is indispensable to neopagans.⁶ It involves ritually channeling the energy of the earth/cosmos

³ Ibid., 32-33.

⁴ Ibid., 43-54.

⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶ Ibid., 101.

through the magician to accomplish some task, although Magliocco feels that it enhances but does not replace one's efforts in the material world.

The author discusses how the modernist world view desacralized human life and how to resacralize it; to restore the connections between material and spiritual. "Casting a circle" creates sacred space in which pagan rituals occur and observing rites repairs the link between matter and spirit in time. For example, neopagans celebrate year cycle rituals such as New Year and life cycle rituals including birth, puberty, marriage, and death. They also have rituals for times of crisis. They follow a specific format, including "creating sacred space" by casting a circle, delineating that space by "calling the quarters", "calling the deities", performing the ritual to transform the consciousness, and "regrounding" to conclude the ritual.⁷ As noted above, the goal is for those involved to experience the ecstasy of the numinous.

The last portion of *Witching Culture* describes the relationship of Neopaganism with other groups in American culture. While the US is a multicultural land, either a "melting pot", a "vegetable soup" or a "martini cocktail" depending on which metaphor an author wants to use, Neopaganism is by and large white and "privileged."⁸ Some in the movement feel that their "whiteness" eliminates their cultural distinctiveness and some neopagans appropriate beliefs and practices from other groups. Native Americans especially have objected to neopagan "culture borrowing", using objects and rituals from their culture. Some believe that only those with blood ties to a culture can use their culture. Since Magliocco sees most American pagans as belonging to the dominant group, such culture borrowing can itself be oppressive; a fact which has vexed the neopagan movement.

⁷ Ibid., 138-141.

⁸ Ibid., 210-211.

Critique

Magliocco wrote that the term Neopagan was coined in Britain in the 1890s, but others have written that it originated in Nazi Germany.⁹ Subsequently, though she discusses the history of Neopaganism at length, she completely ignores the Nazi experience.

Like most non-Christians in my experience who write about Christianity, Magliocco has a poor grasp of what the Bible actually teaches. She accuses Protestants of breaking the link between people and “the sacred”,¹⁰ but if Christian mysticism is “preparation for, consciousness of and reaction to the immediate or direct presence of God,”¹¹ real believers want nothing more. It was the idolatrous elements, not the spiritual connections, that the Reformers opposed. The description of the Interconnected Universe was fascinating, although most Christians would have no problem with many of the tenets.¹²

As believers in the Creator of the Universe, Christians are second to none in their understanding of the link between matter and spirit. Christians have sacred space, from sanctuaries to places for “quiet time”. Most believers follow rituals in time, including Christmas, Easter, and many other holidays. Followers of Christ had rituals for rites of passage and times of crisis for millennia before neopagans did, and these rituals also have beginning, middle and end. The difference is that while neopagans believe that they can compel action in a deity, Christians know that the Deity is beholden to no one.

⁹ James R. Lewis, *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 15.

¹⁰ Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 32-33.

¹¹ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), s.v. “Mysticism”, 806-807.

¹² Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 102-104.

Magliocco's discussion of culture borrowing was thought provoking. Cultures continually influence each other, as in her examples of blue grass and jazz in American music. Every time that I eat a taco, fried rice or a pizza I am borrowing from a different culture. Using words like beef (French) and angst (German) is also "culture borrowing." Such activities are inevitable, and actually a complement to the culture that was borrowed from.

Nothing sums up the neopagan movement better than the following quote from a practitioner, "I thought it (paganism) was a way for me to reclaim some of the aesthetics of the Catholic Church - the imagery of the saints, the shrines, and so on – but without having to take on the baggage of Catholic morality."¹³ Ultimately, each person does what they want to do, regardless of reason, aesthetics, or anything else.

Conclusion

Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America is one of the better books on Neopaganism in the United States that I have read. Magliocco does a good job of reporting on the movement and openly admits her affinity for it. It is an ethnography more than it is a survey, which means that it included personal observation and participation rather than just a literature review and distant observations. The book is not objective, even as much as anything written by a human can be objective, but it is far less biased than it could be. The author does not pretend to be a Christian theologian but she could have done a better job of accurately representing Christianity. Overall, this is a sound book on a colorful religious movement that has earned a place on the book shelf.

¹³ Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 227.